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ABSTRACT

A study examined the impact of remote control devices, videocassette recorders, and cable television on inheritance effects (the tendency for viewers to continue watching a channel at the conclusion of a program). Inheritance effects were measured by calculating the correlation between program share and lead-in program share for all primetime programs with a network lead-in for the years 1983 to 1988. For each year studied, program shares (2,192 in all) were selected for two weeks in January, April, July, and November to insure that yearly comparisons could be made and that sample programs were stratified to control for the possible influences of seasonal audience changes and ratings sweeps. Results indicated that inheritance effects in network primetime programming were found to have decreased in the 1983, 1984, and 1985 seasons. However, results also indicated that the decreases in inheritance effects were reversed for the years 1986 to 1988. Findings suggest the composition of the network primetime television audience is changing and that the networks are possibly adjusting their promotion and scheduling practices to counteract declining inheritance effects. (Two tables of data and a note are included; 20 references are attached.) (RS)

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Countering the New Media

The Resurgence of Inheritance Effects

In Primetime Network Television

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Countering the New Media:

The Resurgence of Inheritance Effects

in Primetime Network Television

Abstract

Despite recent interest in the new technologies, media researchers have only begun to examine the impact of remote control devices, VCRs, and cable television on inheritance effects. In this study, inheritance effects in network primetime programming were found to have decreased in the 1983, 1984, and 1985 seasons. This was predicted from the rapid growth in cable television, VCR, and remote tuner penetration during this time. But, surprisingly, these decreases were reversed in the 1986 to 1988 period. These results are discussed in the context of the changing composition of the network primetime television audience and possible adjustments in network promotion and scheduling practices.

Countering the New Media: the Resurgence of Inheritance Effects in Primetime Network Television

Introduction

The tendency for viewers to continue watching a television channel at the conclusion of a program is well established. Both broadcast/cable programming researchers and industry practitioners are acutely aware of the persistence of these "inheritance" or "lead-in" effects. Industry programmers regularly employ "block programming," "hammocking," and "lead-in placement" (Lewine, 1981; Lewine, Eastman & Adams, 1985) to enhance inheritance effects. Starting with the more general concerns of audience duplication (Goodhardt, Ehrenberg & Collins, 1975) and program choice (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983), broadcast programming researchers have begun to examine factors that affect inheritance effects. Recent research has measured inheritance effects in three programming arenas: a local television market (Webster, 1985), network primetime programming (Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988), and between local news and entertainment programs (Boemer, 1987).

Variables Related to Inheritance Effects

Programming researchers have identified four factors that enhance or inhibit inheritance effects: audience availability, the number of program options, the compatibility of adjacent program types, and the program type. Inheritance effects increase with audience size because "the same people tend to be available and to watch television in adjacent time periods" (Webster, 1985, p. 123). Thus, the size of inheritance effects is partially

determined by audience availability. To control this tendency, some researchers (Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988) have used share rather than rating data, since share data are "less sensitive than ratings to differing HUT levels among pairs of adjacent programs and thus should be less likely to produce lead-in [inheritance] effects solely as a result of audience availability" (Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986, p. 53).

Researchers have also found that inheritance effects are greater when programming choice is restricted (Goodhardt et al., 1975; Webster, 1985; Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988). The amount of audience inherited from the preceding program is greatest when there are no other programs starting at the same time. As the number of network options increases, inheritance effects decrease. For example, in the most recently published study of inheritance effects, Walker found correlations of .89 with one option (no other program starting at the same time), .72 with two options (one other program starting), and .58 with three options (two other programs starting) (p. 396).

The compatibility of adjacent program types also contributes to inheritance effects. Adjacent programs of the same type (situation comedy, drama, etc.) usually produce greater inheritance effects than adjacent programs of different types (Webster, 1985; Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988). To exploit this tendency, network programmers often schedule programs of the same type in two hour blocks. Tiedge and Ksobiech reported that the correlation of ratings shares for adjacent programs decreased from .62 to .41 when the adjacent programs were of a

different type.

Walker (1988) found certain program types have a greater tendency to produce inheritance effects than others. Of the most common network program genres, situation comedies produced the greatest inheritance effects, while entertainment specials and mystery/suspense programs produced the least. Since situation comedies are shorter than most other program types, viewers are more likely to commit to a second situation comedy after watching a first. The tendency for situation comedies to be block programmed and to start on the half hour, when fewer program options are available, may also account for their successful promotion of inheritance effects.

Inheritance Effects and New Media

Recent studies reflect an increasing interest in the inheritance effect at a time when more attention also is being focused upon the impact of developing technologies on television programming (Atkin & Litman, 1986; Webster, 1986; Walker, 1988). Walker has argued that two aspects of the new telecommunications technologies should impact directly on inheritance effects. First, since the number of program options is inversely related to inheritance effects, the increasing variety of video choices afforded by the rapid growth of cable television penetration and video cassette sales should have eroded inheritance effects. As cable television penetration grew from 26.5% in 1981 to 52.8% in 1988 (Broadcast Marketing & Technology News, 1985, August and 1988, December) and VCR penetration from 20% in 1984 to 60% in 1988 (Broadcast Marketing & Technology News, 1985, October and 1988, December),

the increase in consumers' viewing choices should have encouraged more channel hopping, reducing inheritance effects. Second, the surge in the penetration of remote control tuners--45% in early 1987, 50% in late 1988, and 66% in late 1988 (Broadcast Marketing & Technology News, 1987, April, 1987, December, and 1988, December)--made it easier for viewers to select from the diversity in viewing options offered in the new media environment.

Walker (1988) studied network primetime inheritance effects in 1976, 1979, 1982, and 1985. After controlling for potentially confounding variables (number of program options and lead-in/program type compatibility), he found that inheritance effects significantly increased between 1979 and 1982 and then decreased by almost the same amount between 1982 and 1985. Walker argued that the earlier increase in inheritance effects was due to the exit of early adopters of VCR's and cable from the primetime audience, leaving a less venturesome audience which was more prone to inheritance effects. The decrease between 1982 and 1985 was attributed primarily to the rapid increase in the sales of remote control tuners, which greatly facilitate channel hopping.

Hypothesis

In this study, it was hypothesized that the increasing penetration of remote control tuners, VCR's, and cable television in the 1983 to 1988 period has increased the frequency of channel changing. This, in turn, has led to an increase in the percentage of viewers who switch channels at the conclusion of network primetime programs, thus decreasing inheritance effects. This study extends Walker's (1988) analysis to primetime ratings

collected in 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, and 1988, and re-examines data from 1982 and 1985.

Method

Program Sample

Following the example of recent research (Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988), inheritance effects were measured by calculating the correlation between program share and lead-in program share. The use of share data allowed for the control of variations in audience availability. Shares for all primetime (8-11 PM, EST) programs with a network lead-in were obtained from weekly summaries of Nielsen ratings reported in USA Today. For each year studied (1983-88), program shares (N = 2192) were selected for two weeks in January, April, July, and November, the same months used by Walker (1988). This procedure ensured that yearly comparisons could be made and that the sample programs were stratified to control for the possible influences of seasonal audience changes and ratings sweeps.

Control Variables

Although yearly variations in audience availability were controlled by the use of shares, other controls were needed for yearly variations in number of program options and lead-in/program type compatibility. For each sample program, the number of other network programs starting at the same time were recorded: one option (no other programs starting at the same time), two options (one other program starting) and three options (two other programs starting).

Lead-in/program type compatibility was determined by comparing each program's type to the type of its lead-in program. For example, if a drama scheduled between 9 and 10 PM was preceded by an action/adventure program, a score of zero was recorded for lead-in/program type compatibility. But if it was preceded by another drama, a score of one was recorded. Using a procedure described by Tiedge and Ksobiech (1986), programs were classified by assigning each program and its lead-in to one of 11 program types. Since Tiedge and Ksobiech included only regularly scheduled programs in their analyses, an additional category was added to include all entertainment specials (e.g. mini-series, awards programs).

Results

Number of Options and Lead-in/Program Type Differences

The mean correlation between program and lead-in shares was somewhat stronger (r =.70) than those reported by Tiedge and Ksobiech (1986) (r =.49) and nearly the same as those reported by Walker (1988) (r = .69). The relationships between inheritance effects, lead-in/program type compatibility and number of options followed the pattern identified in the earlier studies.

Table 1 about here

The lead-in/program correlation was stronger when programs and their lead-ins were of the same type (r = .82) than when they were of different types (r = .54) and when programs were in the one option situation (r = .89) rather than the two options (r =.75), or the three options (r = .58) situations.

Differences by Program Type

Differences in lead-in/program correlations were examined for each of the 11 program types. These separate analyses produced the following correlations: situation comedy (r = .85, n = 738), action/adventure (r = .58, n = 467), drama (r = .65, n = 380), movies (r = .45, n = 258), entertainment specials (r = .53, n = 135), news/information/talk (r = .32, n = 115), mystery/suspense (r = .88, n = 44), sports (r = .84, n = 31), and science fiction (r = .54, n = 19). Since there were only three quiz/game programs and only two variety programs included in the sample, no lead-in/program correlations were calculated for these program types. Situation comedies, which are routinely programmed in two hour blocks, had substantially higher levels of inheritance than most other program types. The exceptions were mystery/suspense and sports programs, neither of which was highly represented in the sample.

Changes in Inheritance Effects 1983-1988

For each year, separate second-order correlations were run between program and lead-in shares, controlling for the influence of yearly variations in lead-in/program type compatibility and program options. These second-order correlations as well as the yearly zero-order and first-order correlations between program and lead-in share are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

After controlling for number of program options and lead-in/program type compatibility, the second order correlation between program and lead-in shares dropped sharply to .56 in 1983,

down from .77 in 1982 as reported by Walker (1988). This correlation increased very slightly during the next two years to .59 in 1984 and .61 in 1985. However, the program lead-in shares correlation increased strikingly in 1986 to .76 and remained at approximately this level in 1987 (.78) and 1988 (.74).

Discussion

The results of this study did not support the hypothesis advanced. Because of increasing rates of cable, VCR, and remote control penetrations, it was predicted that inheritance effects between network primetime television programs would decline steadily from 1983 to 1988. The results of this study, which employed the same method as Walker's (1988), found a substantial drop in inheritance effects for the years 1983-85, but an equally substantial increase for the years 1986-1988. The decreases in inheritance effects in the 1983-85 period from the 1982 levels were similar to Walker's (1988) earlier findings, but the increase in the 1986-88 period was unexpected. The impact of the number of program options and lead-in/program type compatibility on inheritance effects followed the identical pattern reported in earlier studies (Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986; Walker, 1988). The results of the analysis of inheritance effects by program type were also similar to earlier findings (Walker, 1988).

In an attempt to account for the unexpected increase in inheritance effects in the 1986-88 period, a second partial correlation analysis was completed, using one additional control variable: program type. Since some program types are associated with higher inheritance effects, it is possible that yearly

differences in the number of "high inheritance" program types (e.g. situation comedies) and "low inheritance" program types (e.g. movies, entertainment specials, news) might account for yearly differences in network primetime inheritance effects.

To test this hypothesis, the potential inheritance value of each program type was measured by assigning to it the average lead-in/program correlation obtained in this study for that type (see page 7). Then program type was added to number of program options and lead-in/program type compatibility as control variables. Separate partial correlations between lead-in and program shares were calculated for each year. These third-order correlations were as follows: .56 in 1983, .59 in 1984, .61 in 1985, .75 in 1986, .77 in 1987, and .72 in 1988. The additional control variable--program type--did not change inheritance effects in 1983, 1984, and 1985, and produced only very slight decreases in 1986 (.01), 1987 (.01), and 1988 (.02). Thus, the unexpected increase in inheritance effects in 1986-88 cannot be explained by yearly differences in the types of programs scheduled by the networks.

The explanation for these surprising results must lie elsewhere. Walker postulated that a similar unexpected increase in inheritance effects between 1979 and 1982 was due to the desertion of more venturesome viewers from the network primetime audience to cable. He argued that the more conservative viewers that remained in the network primetime audience might produce increased inheritance effects. This explanation might still apply, since cable penetration continued to grow in the 1986-88

period.

According to Heeter and Greenberg (1985), those more venturesome viewers, as defined through the zapping of commercials, tend to be male more than female and younger rather than older. If cable is siphoning off the male audience and younger audience, those more prone to use remote control devices to zap commercials and "graze" through channels in search of content rather than commercials, then the remaining audience for broadcast television would be more female and older. They are more prone to inheritance, zap less, and graze less often.

That may offer a partial explanation for the resurgence of inheritance effects during an era of remote control and cable growth accompanied by an ageing and feminization of the network audience.

The learning processes of viewers may constitute another factor. Yorke and Kitchen (1985) have shown that remote control usage increases dramatically during commercial breaks and Kaplan (1985) and Heeter and Greenberg (1985) have demonstrated that remote usage peaks at the break between television programs. The commercial zappers are, it would seem, in search of content rather than additional or different commercials. But broadcast television channels contain commercial breaks at much the same time with non-program material running to as much as nine minutes between programs (Kaplan, 1985). As that block of non-program material is predictable, and as the other broadcast channels have nothing especially different during that time, cable channels would provide a haven of content for such remote control users.

Channels such as MTV, ESPN, and CNN are more apt to be offering content with short-form videos to long-form sporting events than would broadcasters. In addition, Turner's WTBS begins its shows at :05 and :35 instead of on the hour and half hour and generally offers content while networks are playing commercials.

The experienced zapper would learn that broadcast channels offer more of the same (ads) and cable would have more tendency to offer content.

The last piece in the zapping puzzle is the orientation of a number of cable channels. There are more channels appealing specifically to male audiences in cable than in broadcasting.

ESPN (and other sports services) CNN, MTV, Playboy and other channels target male viewers. So, when predominantly male and youthful zappers are seeking an alternative to commercials, cable offers them what they seek.

It is also possible that the television networks reacted to the decrease in inheritance effects in the 1983-85 period by increasing the effectiveness of their program promotions, placing more next-program promotions at the end of lead-in programs. The technique of the "hot switch," a jump from one program to another without an interceding commercial break was used by affiliate stations to move from early evening local news programs to their networks' news programs. The technique was also used to jump from late news shows to network programs like the Tonight Show.

A form of the hot switch, some reduction in the time between lead-in show content and object show content, could have held primetime audiences more effectively. One version of a hot switch

was the promotion of shows following during the end credits of the lead-in program. Voiced "teases" describing the upcoming show and its attractions were inserted over the sound track of the lead-in program's credits. Eventually, the credits screen was shrunk in size and placed in a corner of the screen while a visual plus voice promo filled the bulk of the screen. That helps create a "seamless" effect where one program runs into the next with a minimum of non-content material.

An additional form of this strategy might be called the "content beginning" where the program in question starts with the story rather than the standard theme and credit opening. Hill Street Blues and other shows began in this fashion. The opening credits run later than normal, after the audience is, hopefully, drawn into the story.

Networks also may have reacted by shortening the commercial/station breaks following programs, thus reducing the opportunities for channel hopping.

Other network strategies to counteract declining inheritance could have included demographic targeting, program acquisition and placement aimed at increased audience flow, and placing like shows together more consistently rather than counterprogram shows on competing networks. Demographically targeted shows such as St. Elsewhere, Moonlighting, and thirtysomething have shifted the audience focus from the mass audience to a narrower demographic segment. By developing shows from the planning stages for specific programming time periods, inheritance could be increased. And, in the era of 35 and more channel options, counterprogramming events on competing networks may not be prudent when there are so many

competitors to consider. Focusing upon existing programs and blocking them together may be more productive in the current television environment.[1]

Nevertheless, this analysis of network primetime program shares appears to challenge the notion that there is a negative linear relationship between the penetration of new technology (cable, VCR's, and remote control) and inheritance effects. A clear decline in inheritance effects in the 1983-85 period was followed by an equally clear rise in the 1986-88 period. Zapping may be increasing (Kneale, 1988), but so are inheritance effects in primetime network television.

The explanations presented here are not sufficient, in and of themselves, to explain the rise in inheritance effects. Thus, further research, aimed at the reasons behind such a rise, is needed.

Notes

1. The three broadcast networks were contacted regarding the issues raised in this article and asked if any specific strategies were employed beginning in mid-decade to increase inheritance effects. Only one network responded, in the person of William Rubens, former Director of Research for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). He stated that there was no strategy of which he was aware and, to the best of his knowledge, the network was not cognizant of any shift in inheritance effects. He did, however, express great interest in the research and requested a copy of the results.

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Table 1

Pearson r's for the relationship between a program's share and the share of its network lead-in program

	Program type same as lead program		Program type different from lead program		All programs with a network lead	
Number of alternatives	n	r	n	r	n	r
One option	392	.93	154	.73	546	.89
Two options	256	.85	322	.60	578	.75
Three options	337	.68	731	.51	1068	.58
For all options	985	.82	1207	.54	2192	.70

Table 2

Zero-Order, First Order, and Second Order Correlations

between Program and Lead-In Shares

Year	Zero-Order	Controlling Program Options	Controlling Type Compatibility	Controlling Both
1982*	.76	.77	.76	.77
1983	.54	.57	.55	.56
1984	.59	.61	.58	59
1985	.58	.62	.58	.61
1986	.76	.77	.75	.76
1987	.79	.79	.78	.78
1988	.75	.74	.74	.74

* the 1982 correlations are from Walker (1988).